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Iran matters for Europe

That April 2nd was an important day for the European Union and its foreign policy role was underlined by the fact that the Lausanne preliminary agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue was announced jointly by the EU's high representative for foreign affairs, Federica Mogherini, and the Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif. This was clear recognition of the role played by the EU in reaching that important – and difficult – juncture.

The Iranian nuclear deal is not only important in itself, but may turn out to be a significant test case for a substantial evolution towards a common EU foreign policy. At the same time, it will also constitute a test of internal cohesion and consistency among member states, as well as of the strength of the European alliance with the US.

How has Europe reacted and what should it do?

At the very beginning of the Iranian nuclear question, Tehran's interlocutors were not the Americans (who at the time were reluctant to engage with the Iranians), but instead, three European countries: the UK, France and Germany. The nominalistic debate on whether they should be called E3 or EU3 revealed something substantial: the initially less-than-evident role of the EU as such. Yet, as the negotiation laboriously proceeded over more than ten years, the role of the EU, and of its high representative, grew. Despite the prominence of the US, the EU's contribution should not be underestimated when assessing each player's role in the Lausanne agreement.

Now the issue for the EU is how to devise an active policy for the delicate post-Lausanne phase. The achievement of a final agreement at the end of June appears to be subject not so much to the solution of the remaining issues under negotiation, as to the role of political factors (and actors) both in Tehran and, especially, in Washington. The somewhat contradictory statements that have come out of Tehran since Lausanne reveal what seems to be more like instrumental posturing, in particular

by the Supreme Leader, than real opposition to the deal. However, much more dangerous for the final outcome of the agreement is the possible impact of the complex political-constitutional dialectics between President Obama and the US Congress.

The EU has proved consistent in its firm stance toward Iran, in particular by implementing both UN and EU sanctions that have been very costly to Europe in economic terms. At the same time, it has always been convinced that sanctions were aimed at inducing a more reasonable Iranian negotiating position, such as the preservation of a peaceful nuclear industry – albeit under an enhanced system of inspections – and not the achievement of an unrealistic total surrender of Iranian interests. The gradual convergence of the Obama administration with this approach, together with the more flexible Iranian negotiating stance adopted by the Rohani/Zarif team, allowed the negotiators to overcome what seemed insurmountable obstacles.

Firmness & unity will bring Europe benefits

Europeans – both as the EU and bilaterally – should therefore make it unequivocally clear to Washington that firmness and unity are necessarily tied to a steady commitment to reaching a final result, and that a collapse of the Iranian deal would entail consequences that both Americans and Europeans have a stake in averting. As noted by the New York Times: *“Even if Congress barred Mr. Obama from waiving American sanctions, the European Union and the UN could lift the sanctions they imposed, thus undercutting the American decision”*. Thus, both economic interest (sacrificed only to achieve a satisfactory diplomatic result) and the perspective of the positive regional impact of an agreement explain why a positive conclusion to the Iranian nuclear issue is so important for the EU. And Washington should be made fully aware of it.